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Middle School Students' Views about Leaders and Leadership

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Abstract

This article presents the ideas of 72 Australian middle school students from 12 metropolitan schools across six states and territories as to their understanding of leadership. Initially, literature is reviewed on developments in middle years education and theories of leadership pertinent to student leadership. The research methodology is then explained, providing an overview of the participants, the school contexts and methods of data collection and analysis. The subsequent section on results is presented under three topics: examples of good leaders, attributes that make for a good leader and participants' understanding of the concept of leadership. A final discussion is centred on three considerations: the form of leadership that middle school students believe appropriate, the type of leadership which they rejected, and possible underlying reasons for their choices.

Keywords

Student voice, middle years, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, Servant Leadership

Introduction

Developments since the turn of the millennium have seen a worldwide movement towards promoting student leadership within school settings. Decisions on what leadership entails, the type of leadership students should exercise and how students are trained to exercise this leadership are often the prerogative of adults. Educational policy, both national and international, has focused progressively on encouraging students to engage positively in their learning and to take a role in the decision-making and change processes within their schools. The purpose behind such policies has been to improve active citizenship and civic responsibility (Black, et al., 2014). These developments reflect an established perception that schools are ideal

places to promote notions of civic responsibility (van Linden & Fertman, 1998) and civic service (Chapman & Aspin, 2001). It also acknowledges the key role schools have for developing an overall sense of leadership in students (van Linden & Fertman) as well as fulfilling the call by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for the voice of children to be heard on issues that affect them (Groundwater-Smith, 2011). Karaigianni and Montgomery (2017) also point out that it is the experiences of leadership that children and adolescents have that can shape their leadership behaviours in adulthood.

This article explores the perceptions and opinions of 72 middle school students from Years 7 to 9 about their understanding of the notion of leadership. These students were drawn from 12 secondary schools in six states and territories across Australia. The importance of this student cohort is twofold. Firstly, while there is a growing body of literature on student leadership and student leadership development, much of this literature reflects an adult perspective. Appreciating student viewpoints on leadership is critical. Such perspectives provide a starting point for any ensuing leadership development for students. To ignore the student perspective runs the risk of simply imposing ideas that may have little connection or traction with student understanding and experience. Secondly, the focus of much of the literature on student leadership tends to concentrate on the leadership of senior students (Coffey & Lavery, 2017).

The research design underpinning this study entails a constructivist epistemology, a theoretical perspective based on interpretivism, methodology centred on qualitative content analysis and data collection methods that include 40-minute focus group interviews and researcher-generated field notes (Crotty, 1998; Punch & Oancea, 2014). Constructivism is often combined with interpretivism and is typically associated with qualitative research. As an approach to research, constructivism posits that people develop subjective meanings to their experiences. These meanings are varied and numerous which directs the researcher to look for a complexity of views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interpretivism contends that trust and knowledge are subjective, culturally and historically situated and based on peoples' experiences and their understanding of these experiences (Ryan, 2018). The chosen methodology of qualitative content analysis provides a vehicle for analysing the data collected in the focus group interviews through a process of "identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton, 1990). The aim of this research design is to

promote an understanding of leadership through the experiences and ideas of middle school students as presented in their own words.

Review of the Literature

Two areas in the literature underpin this research into middle years students' understanding of leadership. These areas are developments in middle years education and theories on leadership pertinent to student leadership, in particular, transformational leadership, distributive leadership and servant leadership.

Developments in middle years education

The period of early adolescence is a time like no other when young people experience rapid physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. The unique nature of these 'middle years' between childhood and adulthood has led to a focus on how schools can best cater for students during this time. School organisation, the built environment, pedagogy and the qualities of teachers best suited to working in a middle years context have all been the subject of investigation. Such considerations acknowledge both the particular developmental tasks that early adolescents need to accomplish as well as the role of schools in equipping students with the requisite skills to in order to best meet the challenges of adulthood. Such challenges include, inter alia, acquiring independence and a sense of identity, developing and maintaining more adult relationships, becoming reflective and abstract thinkers, developing their sexual identity and becoming more independent decision makers (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990; Nagel, 2014). San Antonio (2006) also points out that "early adolescence is not only a time of turmoil; it can be a period of tremendous resilience, productivity, cognitive growth, generosity and increasing involvement" (p. 9). Redmond, et al. (2016) make a number of telling observations with respect to early adolescents. Firstly, they note that this period in a child's life is complex and that policy makers need to focus on more than simply academic achievement. Secondly, is the fact that "young people are the experts in their own lives" (p. xii) and therefore need to be included in decisions that impact them. With such observations in mind focus has been increasingly directed to developing a keen understanding of the particular imperatives at play in an early adolescent's life and how their experience of formal schooling can help them navigate the challenges they face.

In creating positive school environments that are responsive to the needs of early adolescents much attention has been directed to identifying the defining characteristics of such entities. Pendergast (2017) notes that effective middle years education can only occur “through the thoughtful adoption of intentional approaches to learning and teaching that take account of, and respond to, young adolescent learners in formal and informal contexts” (p. 3). Adolescent Success (2018), for example, a peak Australian organisation focused on early adolescents, recommends that ‘Places of Learning’ need to be flexible, diverse, democratic, positive, safe and engaging. Similarly, the teachers working with young adolescents need to be dedicated, knowledgeable, empathetic, passionate and relational. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a detailed discussion of best practice in the education of early adolescents, it is important to note that it is only by adopting an acute awareness of the specific characteristics of the adolescent learner as a starting point that effective middle schooling can result. Thus, schooling in the middle years needs to look, sound, and feel different to that experienced in other phases of development. What is becoming more evident is the need for increased opportunity for students to exercise greater agency during the middle years. For example, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) which provides the vision for Australian education points specifically to the need for middle years students to have a “voice in and influence over their learning” (p. 13). One of the key means by which students can do this is through opportunities to exercise leadership.

Theories on leadership

Definitions of leadership are diverse. Such definitions have seen a development in the understanding of leadership that has included the more traditional heroic notion of a leader linked with power or authority (Stokes & James, 1996), a behavioural understanding of leadership incorporating trait theory (Dalglish & Miller, 2016) a situational approach to leadership (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005) to a more integrative perception of leadership as a combination of trait, behavioural and situational theories as a means to explaining “successful, influencing leader-follower relationships” (Dalglish & Miller, 2016, p. 107). Such theories or models of leadership comprise, but are not limited to charismatic, servant, transactional, transformational, transcendental, distributive and instructional leadership. This review

of literature considers three integrative models of leadership pertinent to middle school student leadership: transformational, distributed and servant.

Transformational leadership is generally seen as embodying four factors: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration (Stone, Russell, & Paterson, 2003). Idealised influence entails leaders acting as role models for high ethical behaviour where they instil pride and earn trust and respect. Inspirational motivation is related to the formation and communication of a shared vision for the future. Inspirational stimulation expresses how leaders challenge assumptions, take risks and seek followers' ideas. Individual consideration involves leaders demonstrating empathy, attending to followers' needs and concerns and acting as mentors (Deluga, 1998; Stone, Russell & Paterson, 2017).

Transformational leadership tends to be team focused and may be used to “develop team communication and conflict management skills, and promote team cohesion” (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004, p. 181).

Distributed or shared leadership involves developing leadership “among many, and not just the chosen few who show obvious potential” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 96). The leader's role is to “distribute” leadership appropriately throughout an organisation to enhance members' skills and knowledge. The aim is to develop a leadership culture where people are accountable for their contributions to the overall team or organisation. There are five requirements for distributed leadership to work: empowerment of all; shared purpose; shared responsibility; respect for people, their skills and knowledge; a focus on working together in complex, real-life circumstances (Dalglish & Miller, 2016). Distributed leadership, therefore, enacts change “*from* the everyday knowledge and capabilities of staff rather than driving reforms *through* them” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 96).

The central dynamic of servant leadership is nurturing those within an organisation. Greenleaf (1977) is often attributed with articulating the concept of servant leadership. He maintained that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*” (p. 13). Greenleaf stressed that at the heart of such leadership is the wish “to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served” (p. 13). Scholars (Dalglish & Miller, 2016; Spears, 2010) identify ten characteristics of a servant leader. These characteristics include: the ability to listen coupled with reflection; empathy; the capacity to heal relationships; general awareness; a reliance on persuasion rather than authority; conceptualization,

the capacity to dream great dreams; foresight; stewardship; commitment to the growth of people; and the building of community. Similar to the transformational paradigm, servant leadership places high concern for people and production (Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2003) and promotes a more collegial understanding of leadership (Lavery, 2013).

Purpose and significance

The purpose of this research is twofold. Firstly, it is to explore those characteristics which middle year students believe make for good leadership. Secondly, it is to examine what middle years students understand by the term 'leadership'. In the light of the purpose, students were asked three questions:

1. Please name someone whom you consider to be a good leader?
2. What do you believe makes this person (these persons) a good leader?
3. What do you understand by the term 'leadership'?

The significance of this research is two-fold. Firstly, it provides an opportunity for student voice to be heard. Secondly, this research has a national perspective. Most research on student leadership conducted within the Australian context appears to focus at a local level. This project therefore adds to the body of knowledge in the important under-researched area of middle school leadership from the perspective of those most affected by it – the students.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 72 middle school students from Years 7-9 participated in this research. The majority of these students were elected school leaders. There was an even divide of 36 girls and 36 boys and numbers of Year 7, 8 and 9 students were approximately proportional. Students were selected at the discretion of each school.

Context

The researchers explicitly invited 12 metropolitan schools across six Australian states and territories to participate in this research. These schools were deliberately chosen to provide variation sampling (Patton, 1990) at a national level across a range of schools that included educational sectors (Independent, Government

and Catholic), school types (co-educational, boys, girls) and socio-economic status. Table 1 provides an outline of the schools based on Australian state or territory.

Table 1
Schools involved in the study

School	State/Territory	Educational Sector	School Type
A	South Australia	Independent	Co-ed
B	South Australia	Independent	Girls
C	South Australia	Independent	Co-ed
D	Queensland	Catholic	Girls
E	Queensland	Independent	Co-ed
F	Northern Territory	Government	Co-ed
G	Northern Territory	Government	Co-ed
H	Tasmania	Catholic	Boys
I	Victoria	Independent	Co-ed
J	Victoria	Catholic	Boys
K	Western Australia	Independent	Boys
L	Western Australia	Catholic	Girls

Data collection and analysis

Data collection involved 40-minute focus group interviews and researcher-generated field notes. Primarily, the study relied on the audiotaped exchanges between the researchers, or in the case of three schools, an assistant, and middle school students from the 12 purposefully selected secondary schools. Such exchanges were opportunities for the students to express their perceptions, insights and opinions of their understanding of leadership in their own language. The information to be analysed and interpreted by the researchers was recorded almost exclusively in this ‘natural’ language of the students as they attempted to articulate their understandings and experience of leadership. Typically, the focus groups comprised six middle school students from across years 7-9. Researcher-generated field notes were used to record any salient data as they emerged from the course of the interviews. This approach, sometimes referred to as “cryptic jottings: (Berg, 2007, p. 198), entails the

use of brief statements, short notes and the recording of pertinent or unusual terms or phrases.

Drawing meaning from these kinds of data requires methods of qualitative analysis, and the adoption of a qualitative interpretivist paradigm (Neuman, 2006) to inform the methodological conduct of the study. This approach places high importance on interpreting and understanding meaningful social interactions (Weber, 1947) and the empathetic understanding of everyday lived experiences, or *Verstehen* (Neuman) from the perspective of those who live these experiences. The specific approach to explore the participants' understanding of leadership was content analysis. Qualitative content analysis can be defined as a research approach "for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying of themes and patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). There was no intention to compare data from the different educational sectors, states or individual schools, nor to compare data by gender. The transcripts from the focus group interviews were examined for common themes, patterns, topics, symbols and shared mind-sets as described by the middle school students. The researcher-generated field notes were used, where appropriate, to clarify the themes developed from the focus group interviews.

Limitations

There were two potential limitations. The first is that the school sample did not include schools, and hence middle years students, from the Australian Capital Territory or the state of New South Wales. There were two reasons for this situation, the issue of limited finances and the fact that the researcher had no contacts in these two regions. The second limitation is that half the number of students in the research came from independent schools. Any generalisability of results needs to take these two potential limitations into account.

Results

The results from the student interviews are presented under three themes: examples of good leaders, attributes that make a person a good leader and participants' understanding of the concept of leadership.

Examples of good leaders

Participants nominated a range of people who they believed exemplified good leadership. These people could be categorised into three groups: well-known national and international personalities; teachers and principals; and close family members. Participants proposed international notables including Michelle and Barack Obama, Malala Yousafzai, Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Princess Diana, Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill. In particular, leaders who espoused human rights and social awareness were popular choices because “they weren’t afraid to speak their mind” and “were prepared to stand up for others.” Moreover, these people were seen as honest and inspiring. Sporting celebrities, mostly Australian, were mentioned and included such personalities as Steve Waugh, Adam Goodes, Donald Bradman, Cathy Freeman as well as US tennis player Serena Williams. Participants felt that these sports persons were good leaders because of the way they encouraged others, faced diversity, and were exemplars, particularly of women, in sport.

Participants in three focus groups suggested current and former principals (and headmasters) as examples of good leaders, Participants believed these people demonstrated “leadership values of the school”, they “made a difference”, they “ensured everything runs smoothly” and they are “someone you can look up to and admire”. Participants in two focus groups also mentioned various teachers both past and present. For example, one participant commented on a former teacher who “was a really great person and she was always there for her students”. Another participant remarked, “we’ve got some teachers who really work so hard to make sure that we’re the best ... they really set an awesome example for us to follow.” Participants in one focus group suggested parents and close family members. One participant believed “all mothers are good leaders”. Another participant observed, “dad’s a pretty good leader ... I do look up to dad”. A third student considered his brother was a good leader since “he’s seven years older than me ... he’s had a lot more experience. He is able to come back and give me advice.”

Dispositions that make for good leadership

Participants highlighted four interconnected dispositions which they believed made for good leadership. These attributes included: leaders need to be people of integrity, they must be other-centred and relational in their leadership, they should be courageous and finally, leaders need to be inspirational. Participants from all focus groups were emphatic in their belief that leaders must have integrity. That is, they

should be “compassionate towards everyone”, generous, kind and respectful. They need to be empathetic where they put themselves in “others’ shoes” to consider how the choices they make will affect the people they lead. They must have a “good sense of justice”, “make change for the good”, do “what’s right, not what’s easy”, and “do the right thing”, be humble and act “so that the world is better. They should not “put themselves first”, be brash, overbearing or “think they’re better than everyone.” Rather, leaders should “work with their people”, “know their people ... each one individually”, inspire others “by setting an example worth following” and “value other’s opinions as well as their own.”

Participants almost universally emphasised a requirement that leaders be other-centred and relational in the manner by which they exercised their leadership. For example, leaders should “look at things from other people’s perspectives”, “get others’ opinions”, “help others”, “support others”, and consider “the well-being of the people” with whom they work. Participants contrasted this approach with one they described as “putting yourself first” and ‘Just doing their own thing.’ Participants believed that leaders should “resonate with people, not rule over them.” There was a strong sense that leaders needed to be inclusive. That is, leaders “always listen, take on people’s ideas” and “never leave anyone behind.” Moreover, leaders should “see everyone as a group” where they “build everyone up.” As one participant noted, a leader’s “success is based on working with other people.”

Participants in nine focus groups believed that leaders ought to be courageous. For example, participants highlighted that leaders “need to step out of their comfort zones”, “take responsibility”, and “make a hard decision if it’s what’s right.” Participants noted that leaders are not just “part of the pack” but people who “really step up to the table and help others and set a good example.” It was noted that there are occasions when “leaders have to put themselves at risk” and be prepared “to step in when others may not want to.” In particular, leaders need courage when sometimes they “don’t make the decision that is popular.” Participants indicated that leaders should “not be afraid to express their and other people’s ideas and interests”, “speak up for what they believe in” and have “the courage to stand up for people”. Moreover, leaders must be prepared to enact “what needs to be done, no matter the path or the difficulties in the way.” Further, they must “go that extra step forward and turn an idea into action.” In this regard, leaders undertake a task “because it has to be

done”, not because it is easy. Hence, leaders “take up any opportunity they can to make a difference and help everyone.”

Finally, participants indicated that leaders should be inspirational. That is, leaders need to “inspire people, inspire others to do things.” Participants in eight of the focus groups talked of leaders being able to set “a good example for others to follow.” As one participant explained, “being an example – that’s the most powerful way” to lead. Being inspirational required leaders having a vision, “pushing people to do their best”, acting “professionally at all times” and having the capacity to effectively “communicate to everyone.” Participants noted that communication required leaders “to be good listeners, listening to everyone.” The point being made was that if leaders “don’t listen they cannot really communicate.” Lastly, one participant commented, leaders are “the glue of the group, bringing them together.”

An understanding of leadership

Participants described leadership in terms of operating as part of a team, being adaptable and service-oriented. Participants in four focus groups noted moreover, that everyone has the potential to be a leader. The words “team”, “teamwork” and “group” were consistently mentioned in the various focus groups as was the phrase “work as a team.” Comments included: “leadership is like teamwork, working with everyone’s opinions”, “inspiring others to achieve goals for the team rather than forcing them”, “if you’re a leader ... you’re a member of a team.” Teamwork involved “identifying with every one of the team members”, providing guidance rather than “just telling them”, offering “encouragement” to the team, “promoting a common cause” and the ability “to delegate”.

Participants in four focus groups described leadership in terms of being adaptable to the demands of a given situation. For example, participants noted Participants noted that there were times when leadership means “going to the front of the pack and lighting the way for everyone else”. Participants also indicated that there were occasions “when a good leader would probably lead more from the back and kind of help everyone to be better.” One focus group advanced the “analogy of a shepherd and a flock of sheep” where “the shepherd is not out in front telling the sheep.” As was explained, “a leader is not always out in front telling people, but ... kind of at the back or in the middle letting everyone make their own decisions.” But when things go wrong, the leader “guides and leads the people not doing well.”

Participants from seven focus groups advanced the idea that leadership involved service. They noted that bad leaders “will just try and control everything”, “try and have all the power that they can get”, “do their own thing” and focus on “simply having the badge”. Rather, participants believed that leadership involves “generosity”, it means “putting others first ... it’s for the wellbeing of people, not just themselves”, “it’s about leading people to reach what they can possibly be”. Participants noted that leadership involves “admitting to mistakes, working on them and helping other people work on their mistakes.” It entails “having a mindset that puts others in front of yourself”, of considering “how they can help others for the good of others.” In essence, leadership necessitates “putting others above themselves”. Leaders “think about everyone – it’s not just about them.”

Participants in one focus group raised the idea that leadership is “a quality that everyone has but only some people have the confidence to show.” One participant, using the shepherd motif noted, “there’s always going to be a few people who are going to stand up and become shepherds.” As he explained, “all the sheep possess the quality to be a leader”, but leadership entails someone having “the confidence to step up.” On this point, another participant observed that leadership incorporates “your views on life and your traits ... generally you’re born with them, often you’re taught.” It was, as another participant remarked, the “conundrum of nature over nurture.” As he explained, “it really depends on the person you are.” That is, while “you might have some traits ... the majority of those leadership qualities are developed by you, by the people around you and the people you associate with.” Furthermore, he believed that these qualities could be developed by anyone: “it doesn’t matter how old you are, how young, what race you are, what gender you are.”

Discussion

In light of the results the discussion is centred on three considerations: the form of leadership that the middle schools students believed appropriate; the type of leadership which they rejected; and possible underlying reasons for their choices. Dempster and Lizzio (2007) note the “identifiable gap in our knowledge of students’ understanding of leadership and how they see, experience and interpret it in different situations” (p. 279). The purpose of the current research was to address this gap for unless there is an understanding of what leadership means to students, in this case early adolescents, it is difficult to effectively develop programs aimed at augmenting

their leadership skills. The results from the student focus group interviews indicated that middle school students have very firm views about what leadership *is* and *is not*. The participants perceived leadership as process directed (goal oriented), relational and service oriented. This conception of leadership aligns with the work of Conant and Norgaard (2012) who contend that good leaders have particular dispositions that enable them to be clear and consistent. These dispositions include the head – having a model for how to lead people and change; the heart – having a genuine capacity to engage with others; and the hands – having competence to do things.

It was apparent from the responses of the participants to the question “Name someone you consider to be a good leader” that the middle years students had a more comprehensive view of leadership than someone who might simply be considered a hero. As previously alluded to, the participants named people of integrity, who were other-centred and relational, courageous and inspirational. Participants also highlighted these interconnected attributes as critical to good leadership *per se*. Whilst some of the individuals named by the students as exemplars of good leaders were clearly people of note who they knew from ‘afar’ others were much better known and present in the lives of the students. These observations align with the findings of Roach et al. (1999) whereby the youth interviewed similarly named ‘activists who cared about their followers, teachers who care about students, or even parents who have simply led themselves and their children through difficult situations’(p. 19).. To the students it was important that leaders hold firm to their beliefs, which necessitated making hard decisions from time to time. Being popular or charismatic was not a characteristic attributed to a good leader. Such an understanding of what it means to be a leader finds definite links with notions of transformational leadership. That is, leaders who are highly ethical, communicate a shared vision, seek others’ ideas and demonstrate empathy (Deluga, 1998; Russell & Paterson, 2003). Moreover, transformation leadership is team orientated (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004).

For the participants, leadership was not about getting a badge or telling people what to do. Rather, participants were strong on the notion that leadership was associated with teamwork and involvement as part of a team. These findings support earlier research by Roach et al (1999) who found that “group alliances matter to young people ... relationships and ‘being in the now’ matter more for young people than do links with faceless institutions” (p. 18). As Roach et al. remarked, the “real

power” for young people was not “whether you’re a leader or a follower. The power comes from working as a team” (p. 18). Further, Bahr and Pendergast (2007), noting the work of Howe (2006), point out that the affinity for working in teams is one of the most distinguishing features of young adolescents. The predisposition for teams and teamwork is thought to have a genesis, in part, in the many hours spent in childcare in their early years.

The emphasis on team, rather than self, aligns closely with the adult concept of distributed leadership. The practical element of distributed and shared leadership is encompassed in the working of effective teams. Economic research has indicated that the most consistent strategy for producing high quality goods and services is superior teamwork (Dalglish & Miller, 2016). Participant comments support an affinity for distributed leadership, as participants were unequivocal in their belief that leadership was a shared responsibility. Moreover, such sentiments as the need to ‘step up’ and the idea that everyone possesses the capacity for leadership align strongly with distributed leadership. A distinguishing feature of the distributed leadership model is that in any organisation there are multiple leaders and that responsibility for leadership is shared within the organisation (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Harris (2004) characterises distributed leadership as a form of “collective leadership” where there are “multiple sources of guidance and direction” (p. 14) which emphasises the team over the individual. Emergent leaders, according to McIntyre and Foti (2013), “are individuals whose power and influence over others in a group are derived from acceptance by group members rather than from position, status or rank” (p. 46) and in order to ‘emerge’ as a leader the individual must “demonstrate characteristics and behaviours that fellow members interpret as enabling the group to complete the task at hand” (p. 46). The experience of young adolescents in teams and their own observations of emergent leaders may have shaped the view of the participants in this study about leaders and leadership. Harris further suggests that “collaboration and collegiality are at the core of distributed leadership” (p. 15) – characteristics that one would assume underpin effective teamwork.

Participants were strong in their belief that leadership should be one of service. They rejected notions of self-centredness or power for power’s sake. Rather, participants suggested that leadership must involve the wellbeing of people and the desire to put others before oneself. Such a concept resonates strongly with Greanleaf’s (1997) understanding that leadership is concerned with other people and

their highest priorities. Servant leadership is based on ethical behaviour, a commitment to the growth of people and a focus on building community (Spears, 2010). There is, in addition, a body of literature, which suggests that student leadership should provide opportunities for students to exercise servant leadership, especially to those on the margins (Lavery & Hine, 2013), it should involve students in civic service (Dugan & Komives, 2007) and it should aim to meet the needs of others (Ryan, 1997).

An understanding of leadership that is distributed, transformational and servant sits well with the middle schools students' conviction that good leaders are role models for others, hold firm to their beliefs, make hard decisions when necessary while being empathetic at all times. Hence, leaders are good communicators – both verbal and non-verbal – who can be trusted to do what is in the best interests of everyone. These qualities do not reside in the few but may be considered latent across the group. Thus the participants' belief that everyone has the capacity to lead when the need arises. It was apparent that more autocratic forms of leadership, especially where the perception was that the leader was operating from a position of self-interest, were strongly rejected by the participants. Good leaders were seen as much more focused on the interests of the group and moving everyone towards a common goal.

The need to belong to a group, whilst a very human trait extant at any age, is particularly important for young adolescents. With reference to young adolescents Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as “students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others” (p. 25) in the school environment. The strong need to feel that they belong (linked to the notion of teams discussed above) may also, in part explain the manner in which students both regard and exercise leadership. Hence it may be asserted that, in exercising leadership, young adolescents considered the common interest of the group as more important lest it compromise the standing of the ‘leader’ within the group. In other words, if their own individual interests were seen to dominate they may be isolated by the group and hence threaten their sense of belonging. Providing opportunities for students to ‘practice’ leadership in a safe setting would seem to be important for young adolescents. Barron (2018, cited in Barron & Kinney, 2018,) supports this assertion when he states that student voice matter, not simply because students “get to share their input...but also because in

allowing them to express their opinions in an open forum, we are teaching them the invaluable lesson of how to appropriately share their input” (p. 240).

Such opportunities enable the students to ‘test’ their leadership skills and the consequent results of their actions. Importantly, these leadership opportunities need to be more than simply provision of a badge or a set of jobs for, as the participants in this research noted, leadership is much more. For the participants leadership was much more organic with opportunities arising spontaneously. Interestingly, students did not allude to the notion of power in their response to the questions. Rather leadership was about the person with the best skill-set in a given situation ‘stepping up’ when required. For example, one participant noted that whilst he was not the captain of his cricket team he was able to exercise leadership by suggesting more appropriate field placements if the game situation demanded. He saw this as an opportunity to be a leader. Leadership was about contributing to the team (or group) and was perhaps indicative of the sense of care both for and of the team. In so doing, students have the opportunity to attend to important developmental challenges of early adolescence, noted above, such as developing a sense of identity and becoming more reflective, abstract and independent in their thinking and decision making.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although a general feeling persists among practitioners that youth leadership training is a worthwhile endeavour (Black, et al., 2014; Coffey & Lavery, 2017), such programs often depend on implicit unexamined ideas about how young people develop leadership traits and what leadership entails. This study of 72 Australian middle school students in 12 metropolitan schools across six states and territories indicates that youth may well have a definite sense of what good leadership entails. Moreover, their understanding of leadership rests well with established models of leadership as exemplified in distributed, transformational and servant leadership. In light of the research findings it is recommended that further research of student perceptions of leadership be undertaken. It befits educators interested in developing a sense of leadership in students to be aware of and to build on what is important and relevant to students. Therefore, it is further recommended that school leaders examine their middle school student leadership programs in light of the views expressed about servant, transformational, and distributed leadership as expressed by

the participants in this study. That is, to hear student voice when planning a meaningful student leadership program.

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